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Editorial

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Fading ag markets City shouldn't let them go without discussion

Who'd have thought it? The world's largest buyer of tobacco is leaving the place that once billed itself as the world's largest burley tobacco market.

Philip Morris is moving its tobacco buying station from Lexington to Frankfort not, as far as we can tell, because Lexington is a smoke-free city, but because of an ownership change in the Angliana Avenue warehouse that it had been leasing.

So, this fall, instead of creeping along South Broadway, trailing the sweet scent of ripened tobacco, farm trucks and wagons will be headed to an industrial park in Franklin County.

Most Lexington residents won't miss Philip Morris; some will say good riddance to a company that has profited by marketing a deadly product.

Still, coupled with the Blue Grass Stockyards' difficulty finding a new home, Philip Morris' exit raises questions about Lexington's role as an agricultural market for anything other than horses: Is there a future? Does it matter?

On one level, the Philip Morris move is consistent with the increasing concentration in agricultural marketing of all kinds. Farmers have fewer, larger customers, as a few processors monopolize ever larger chunks of the market.

Burley tobacco production in Kentucky is moving away from its traditional roots in the rolling small farms in the east, central and southern counties to the flat, wide agricultural expanses of the west.

Meanwhile, Lexington's tobacco warehouse district is in such high demand for housing, business and industry that it has become too pricey for its earlier use. The local economy is evolving; the city is finding new uses for old spaces.

Horses, far and away, dominate agriculture here. Cash receipts from raising cattle, tobacco and other row crops in Fayette County pale in comparison.

But the farms where crops and cattle are raised are important to maintaining an agricultural critical mass in a place that's under pressure to develop and sprawl.

The traditional family farms are important. And Lexington is not so big that it can sniff at the \$17 million in cash receipts generated by row crops and beef cattle.

In refusing to expand the urban area and by continuing to support the purchase of development rights program, Lexington is protecting the farmland that makes this place so special.

But farmers need more than land, they also need markets.

After 200 years, maybe the time has come for Lexington to fade as a farm market. Even so, it's not something we should let happen unawares. It is a transition that deserves a